



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**GENDER BIAS IN MALAYSIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS  
USED IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

**SANDA KUMARID/O CHANDRAN**

**FBMK 2002 8**

**GENDER BIAS IN MALAYSIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS  
USED IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

BY

**SANDA KUMARI D/O CHANDRAN**

**Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**September 2002**



**To**

**My late parents, Chandran Pillai and Ambigai, who would have been proud of me if they had been around.**

**My beloved husband, Arjunan, and my darling daughters, Gayathri and Koushallya, who understand me like no others.**

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

## **GENDER BIAS IN MALAYSIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS**

**BY**

**SANDA KUMARI D/O CHANDRAN**

**September 2002**

**Chairperson : Dr. Mardziah Hayati Abdullah**

**Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication**

The purpose of this study was to identify occurrences of gender bias in four Form Four Malaysian English language textbooks. The study examined only the written text, looking at the occurrence of gender bias in the following categories: terms of address, descriptive terms, occupational of gender roles and activities, and the quantitative representation of male and female characters. The data indicates that the number of males portrayed in the textbooks far outweigh that of females. In addition, male characters were portrayed in a greater variety of occupations and as active participants in many outdoor activities, while female characters were largely portrayed in a limited number of occupations and roles and as participants in passive indoor activities.

The findings also reveal that males are associated with more positive descriptive terms than women. Stereotyping is thus seen in the description of male and female characters in the textbooks, whether they were written by male or female writers.

The study also looked at how teachers perceived and responded to the issue of gender bias in the textbooks. Data was collected by means of questionnaires. The response revealed that most teachers were unaware of gender bias in textbooks, their main concern being the completion of the syllabus according to the schedule.

The findings of this study provide evidence of the occurrence of gender bias in Malaysian English language textbooks. This may prompt publishers, writers, TESL teachers, counsellors, administrators, curriculum planners, ESL learners and parents to be more aware of the phenomenon and to exercise greater caution in writing, reading, and teaching with textbooks. Further studies could be carried out to investigate how much or little attention publishers pay to the occurrence of gender bias in the books they publish, and whether textbooks evaluators include selection process.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi sebahagian keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**SIKAP BIAS JANTINA DALAM BUKU TEKS BAHASA INGGERIS DI  
MALAYSIA**

**Oleh**

**SANDA KUMARI D/O CHANDRAN**

**Pengerusi : Dr. Mardziah Hayati Abdullah**

**Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi**

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti sikap bias jantina dalam empat buah buku teks Bahasa Inggeris Tingkatan Empat di Malaysia. Kajian ini hanya meneliti teks bertulis, tentang wujudnya sikap bias dalam kata- kata panggilan, kata- kata deskriptif, peranan dalam kerjaya dan aktiviti serta gambaran watak lelaki dan wanita secara kuantitatif. Data tersebut menunjukkan bahawa watak lelaki yang digambarkan lebih banyak daripada watak wanita. Watak lelaki juga digambarkan menyandang pelbagai jawatan dalam pelbagai bidang kerjaya dan melibatkan diri dalam pelbagai aktiviti luar rumah. Sementara kebanyakan watak wanita digambarkan menjawat jawatan yang terhad dan memainkan peranan pasif dalam aktiviti dalam rumah.

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa berdasarkan teks-teks kajian, kaum lelaki dikaitkan dengan istilah deskriptif yang positif berbanding dengan kaum wanita, sama ada buku teks itu ditulis oleh penulis lelaki ataupun perempuan.

Penyelidikan ini juga mengkaji bagaimana guru- guru melihat dan bertindak balas terhadap isu bias jantina dalam buku teks. Data telah dikumpulkan dengan cara soal selidik. Respon yang diperoleh menunjukkan bahawa kebanyakan guru tidak sedar tentang bias jantina dalam buku teks. Objektif mereka hanyalah menyudahkan sukatan pelajaran dalam jangka waktu yang ditetapkan.

Secara keseluruhan kajian ini memberi bukti kewujudan bias jantina dalam buku – buku teks Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia. Dapatan kajian ini harus mendorong penerbit, penulis-penulis guru bahasa Inggeris, kaunselor, pihak pengurusan, perancang kurikulum, pelajar ESL dan ibu bapa supaya lebih prihatin akan fenomena ini agar lebih berhati-hati dalam penulisan, bacaan dan pengajaran dengan buku teks. Kajian seterusnya harus dilakukan untuk mengkaji berapa banyak atau sedikit perhatian yang diberikan oleh penerbit tentang kewujudan bias jantina dalam buku-buku yang diterbitkan oleh mereka sama ada penilai buku-buku teks memasukkan proses pemilihan.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to the following:

Dr. Mardziah Hayati Abdullah, my supervisor and also my advisor, for her time, relentless guidance, invaluable advice and unwavering faith in me. Words are inadequate to express the depth of my gratitude.

Dr. Mohd Faiz Bin Abdullah, a member of the supervisory committee who provided invaluable academic comments. I am grateful not only for his guidance and support but also for his perseverance which has made this thesis a rewarding experience.

Dr. Wong Bee Eng was another supervisory committee member, who offered unwavering support and invaluable advice throughout, I am grateful indeed.

It was Dr. Chan Swee Heng who initiated me to do my Master of Arts. To her, I owe my gratitude and am forever indebted.

To my principal, Pn. Hj Khuzaimah Binti Hj Sulaiman of SMKA Sheikh Hj Mohd Said, for her understanding and consideration.

To all the teachers, who generously answered my questionnaire. I am also grateful to my co-rater.



To my dear friends, especially Norhana Abdullah, Azizah Ghani, Angeline Rajoo, Muhammed Shahriar Haque and Rozie who offered invaluable guidance and support. Thank you.

I certify that an Examination Committee met on 6 September, 2002 to conduct the final examination of Sanda Kumari d/o Chandran on her Master of Arts thesis entitled "Gender Bias in Malaysian English Language Textbooks" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulation 1980. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

**Chan Swee Heng, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairperson)

**Mardziah Hayati Abdullah, Ph.D.**

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

**Mohd. Faiz Bin Abdullah, Ph.D.**

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

**Wong Bee Eng, Ph.D.**

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)



**AINI IDERIS, Ph.D.**  
Professor / Deputy Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 24 OCT 2002

This thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia has been accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The members of the Supervisory Committee are as follows:

**Mardziah Hayati Abdullah, Ph.D.**

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairperson)

**Mohd. Faiz Bin Abdullah, Ph.D.**

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

**Wong Bee Eng, Ph.D.**

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)



---

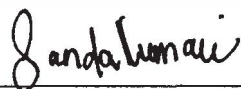
**AINI IDERIS, Ph.D.**

Professor / Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 9 JAN 2023

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



---

SANDA KUMARI D/O CHANDRAN

Date: 24 OCT 2002

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
DEDICATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ABSTRAK	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
APPROVAL SHEETS	ix
DECLARATION FORM	xi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	xii
LIST OF TABLES	xv
LIST OF FIGURES	xvi
 <b>CHAPTER</b>	
 <b>I. INTRODUCTION</b>	 <b>1</b>
1.1 Background of the study	1
1.2 Textbook in the Malaysian school systems	5
1.3 Statement of the Problem	6
1.4 Research Questions	7
1.5 Purpose of the Study.	9
1.6 Conceptual Framework for the Study	10
1.7 Significance of the Study	12
1.8 Limitations	14
1.9 Definition of Key Terms	14
1.9.1 Gender Bias	14
1.9.2 Sexism	15
1.9.3 Sexist Language	15
1.9.4 Sex Role Stereotypes	16
1.9.5 Positive Qualities	16
1.9.6 Negative Qualities	17
1.9.7 Social roles and activities	17
 <b>II. LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	 <b>18</b>
2.1 Introduction	
2.2 Language and Power	18
2.3 Forms of Terms of Address	20
2.4 Research in Gender Bias	25
2.5 Sexist Language	26
2.5.1 Gender Bias in Pronoun Use	28
2.5.2 Gender Bias in 'Man-linked' Terminology	29
2.5.3 Gender Bias in the Use of Feminine Suffixes	31
2.6 Sexist Linguistic Practices	32
2.6.1 The Order of Terms	32
2.6.2 Lack of Parallelism in Terms of Address and Reference	33
2.6.3 Gender Bias References to Relationships	34



2.7 Portrayal of Male and Female Characters in Books	34
2.8 Research in Classroom Gender Bias	40
2.9 Effect of Gender Bias on readers	43
2.10 Research in Malaysia	46
2.11 Summary	47
 III. METHODOLOGY	 49
3.1 Research Design	49
3.2 Samples	52
3.2.1 Textbook Samples	52
3.2.1.1 The Writers	52
3.2.1.2 Textbooks, Content and Topics	53
3.2.2 Questionnaire Respondents	54
3.3 Data Collection Methods and Instruments	54
3.3.1 Text Analysis	54
3.3.2 Questionnaires	55
3.4 Data Analysis	56
3.5 Reliability and Validity	58
3.6 Pilot Study	59
3.7 Results	60
3.7.1 Number of Male and Female Characters	61
3.7.2 Descriptive Terms	61
3.7.3 Pronouns	62
3.7.4 Terms of Address	63
3.7.5 Job Categories	63
3.7.6 Activities	64
3.8 Summary of the Pilot Study	65
 IV ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS	 67
4.1 Introduction	67
4.2 Research Questions 1 and 2	67
4.2.1 Male and Female Characters	68
4.2.2 Terms of Address	68
4.2.3 Common Nouns	70
4.2.4 Pronouns	72
4.2.5 Descriptive Terms	73
4.2.6 Job Categories	77
4.2.7 Activities	89
4.3 Research Question 3	82
4.4 Research Question 4	83
4.5 Summary of Findings	83
4.5.1 How Gender Bias is Reflected in the Textbooks	85
4.5.2 How Teachers perceive Gender Bias	86

V CONCLUSION	88
5.1 Portrayal of Male and Female Characters in Textbooks	88
5.2 Insensitivity of Gender Bias in Educational Materials	91
5.3 Implications from the findings	93
5.3.1 Publishers and Writers	93
5.3.2 Teachers, Counsellors, Administrators and Curriculum Planners	94
5.3.3 Suggestions for Parents	95
5.4 Suggestions for Avoiding Gender Bias in the Writing of Textbooks	97
5.4.1 Alternatives to the pronoun problem	97
5.4.2 Alternative to Man-linked terminology	97
5.4.3 Alternative to Feminine Suffixes	98
5.4.4 Alternative to the Order of terms	98
5.5 Suggestions for Further Studies	99
5.6 Conclusion	99
REFERENCES	101
APPENDIX	
Appendix A—Adjective Checklist	
Appendix B—Masculine and Feminine and Expressions and Alternatives	
Appendix C—Questionnaire-Pilot Study	
Appendix D—Descriptive Terms Appendix E—Pronouns	
Appendix F—Terms of Address	
Appendix G—Job Categories	
Appendix H—Activities (Outdoor and Indoor)	
Appendix I—Chapter IV—Terms of Address	
Appendix J—Common Nouns	
Appendix K—Pronouns	
Appendix L—Describing Behaviour or Personality and Physical Attributes	
Appendix M—Job Categories	
Appendix N—Activities (Outdoor and Indoor)	
Appendix O—Bio-Data of the Author	

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	page
1. Schedule of research	50
2. The writers and the textbooks	53
3. Number and percentage of male and female characters and variables associated with them, found in a Form 4 textbook	60
4. Number and percentage of male and female characters in four Form 4 textbooks	68
5. Total number and percentage of terms of address in all the 4 textbooks	69
6. Number and percentage of common nouns denoting male and female characters found in all the 4 textbooks	71
7. Number and percentage of pronouns used for male and female characters in all the 4 textbooks	72
8. Number and percentage of terms describing behavior or personality and physical attributes of male and female characters in 4 textbooks, according to gender of writer	73
9. Number and percentage of descriptive terms associated with male and female characters in 4 textbooks	74
10. Job categories for male and female characters in order of frequency, found in the 4 textbooks	77
11. Frequency and percentage of outdoor activities involving male and female characters found in the 4 textbooks.	80
12. Frequency and percentage of indoor activities involving male and female characters found in the 4 textbooks.	80



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Conceptual Framework for the Study	10
2. Research Design	51

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the study

In the majority of societies the world over, males have generally been a privileged and favoured gender. Professionally, males have enjoyed a higher social status and more rapid upward mobility compared to females. Socially, females are often placed in subordinate and subservient roles as well.

It wasn't until the mid to late 1960's that gender inequality began to be given attention and research on the subject started appearing regularly in educational journals. In the early part of the 1970's, gender bias became a heated issue. The 1980's saw a downward trend in educational research altogether. This was because the United States was recovering after the war with Vietnam, the economy was suffering and Watergate was just around the corner. Then in the 90's, educational research regained momentum, and an increasing number of studies on gender bias in the educational domain appeared in journals (Konzal,1992).

Gender bias is often insidiously conveyed through social practices and language use. One of the means through which it is conveyed is print matter. The print media includes consumer materials such as trade books and magazines, as well as educational material. For example, there is unequal representation of the sexes in leisure reading materials and school textbooks, with male characters outnumbering females. A study by Foley and Boulware (1996) compared books in 1993 with earlier studies done in the 1960's and 1980's. The results showed "male characters

continue to dominate in required reading instruction materials and also outnumbered their female counterparts”. Frasher and Walker (1972) examined widely used reading textbooks and found that male characters outnumbered female characters by a large majority.

Stereotyping of occupational roles, behaviour and personality can also be found in school reading materials. Typically, females have been represented as positive, dependent, domestic and frequently brainless and silly while males generally have been portrayed as active, independent, brave and clever. Adult females have appeared overwhelmingly in the role of mother and housewife with few alternatives, while adult males have been depicted in numerous occupational roles (Frasher and Frasher, 1978).

Generally, female characters are portrayed as the weaker sex; they are associated with subordinate occupational roles, domestic activity, and character traits such as dependency and passivity.

It is important to address gender bias in educational materials because they are part of the educational experience that helps determine ideas and values that children come to accept as norms. There is considerable tendency for children to carry with them into adulthood misconceptions and pre-conceived ideas about the roles of males and females, which they receive in their early years. These misconceptions will lead to role stereotyping which can affect their career advancement as well as their personal lives.

The Malaysian educational system is, in principle, geared toward the need to produce holistic and integrated individuals in terms of their intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical growth (KBSM, 1987) regardless of ethnicity or gender. This philosophy can encourage both males and females to develop positive personalities and behaviours, and the ability to play flexible roles that contribute to the success of the individual and the nation. Therefore, Malaysian textbooks that are employed as core learning materials should be screened for gender bias. Writers and textbook selection committees and teachers also need to be aware of elements of gender bias in textbook content.

Although gender bias is an important issue, it is not always easy to identify the existence of it in books because it may be conveyed very subtly and perhaps inadvertently. Research studies on gender bias are useful because they help highlight elements of gender bias.

During the past two decades, there has been a great deal of discussion on gender discrimination and sex role stereotyping in educational settings, instructional materials and trade books (Sheridan, 1982). From what began as a consciousness-raising experience, gender studies have emerged as an area of considerable research interest.

One aspect of gender bias studies that has received considerable attention is the role of language in reinforcing gender bias. For example, linguists and feminists have found that contemporary English usage seems to reveal prejudicial attitudes that demean and degrade women while glorifying men, thus apparently reflecting

dominant social values (Smith, 1985:13). Davidson and Gordon (1979: 160) observe that women hedge their statements with qualifiers such as “more or less” or “maybe” and also use “tags” at the end of sentences that consequently make the statements more tentative. These views have continued to interest linguists and feminists alike and have led to numerous exploratory studies in the area of language and gender.

Swann (1992) claims that language has predominantly been a feminist issue because the words and meanings tend to marginalize women:

The best known example of this must be the use in English, of generic “he” and “man” to represent both women and men, but feminists have also identified several “lexical gaps”: an absence of words to refer to women’s experiences. When women get into the language, they are often portrayed negatively or in relation to men (Swann, 1992: 56).

Feminists and linguists have also been concerned with how women and men use the language. From a very young age, children are taught about social norms, that is, ways of behaviour that include ways of speaking. Young girls, for example, are told to “speak like ladies”. Lakoff (1979: 5) observes that if a little girl “talks rough” like a boy, she will normally be ostracized, scolded, or made fun of. Research on gender stereotyping and gender bias has focused on children’s literature and classroom practices. For example, in the English Literature Text used in Secondary Schools “Phantom Of The Opera“, the main male characters are portrayed as dominant and possessive whereas the female characters are timid and fearful. With reference to classroom practices, The American Association of University Women’s (1992) report found that girls receive less attention from teachers than boys. Teachers may also give more attention to the most aggressive students, usually boys.

Less attention has been paid to research on instructional reading materials. While it is true that school reading materials constitute only one mode by which social values are conveyed, it is necessary to point out that school plays an important part in shaping a child's perspectives. Thus, social biases such as stereotyping and discrimination, if they are conveyed through instructional materials, should be identified and addressed (Konzal, 1998).

Gender studies have also predominantly focused on the use of English language in countries where English is the native language. However, with English being used by a total of some 700 million people for whom it is a foreign language, it is today a language used more by those for whom it is a foreign language than by native speakers (Strevens, 1982: 20). English also plays a crucial role in the education system of many countries throughout the world where it is not the native language. One such country is Malaysia, in which English is officially the second language, and an important subject in school.

## **1.2. Textbooks in the Malaysian School System**

According to the Textbook Bureau, set up by the Ministry of Education in 1974, these were the criteria to publish textbooks:

1. To ensure that only suitable and quality textbooks are used in schools. This division evaluates and approves new textbooks and periodically reviews all textbooks currently in use.
2. To provide assistance and guidance on all textbooks to writers and publishers in order to improve the quality of school textbooks.
3. To control the price of textbooks.

4. To compile approved school textbook lists for distribution to all schools.
5. To conduct research on the effective use of textbooks in the classroom.
6. To implement and manage the textbook Loan Scheme.
7. To act as the secretariat for the Textbook Technical Committee.

The objective of this scheme is to help poor, needy pupils obtain textbooks on loan and to prevent them from being left behind in their studies. However, the selection criteria do not include the need to be aware of social issues such as gender bias, which may be reflected in the language and content of textbooks, although language clearly plays the role of an ideological system that produces and reproduces dominant forms of discourse in social practice. The researcher wished to look into the gender bias aspect of discourse and find out if textbook writers are giving 'life' to this aspect of discourse, and if so, how.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

British colonists introduced the English language into the Malaysian school system in the late 1800's. Thus, the patriarchal roots of the English Language (Spender, 1985) have long been planted in the Malaysian society, part of which uses English for everyday communication. The impact that the English language has on the Malaysian community continues to be strong even after 44 years of independence and English language textbooks and supplementary readers are still used in Malaysian schools. The textbook is considered a fundamental tool in the Malaysian School system, providing teachers with guidelines and content to teach in the classroom.

However, even though textbooks are a fundamental tool in the Malaysian school system, the selection and evolution criteria do not require the examination of books for gender bias. Neither do the guidelines for teaching serve to raise awareness of this issue.

Preliminary research carried out by this researcher indicates that there has been a limited number of gender studies in language in an ESL setting, especially in Malaysia. To date, the Textbook Bureau of the Malaysian Ministry of Education has not carried out any studies on gender bias in Malaysian English Language textbooks. Thus, textbooks and other reading materials containing gender-biased language may still be used in many classrooms.

Perhaps one reason for neglecting to examine textbooks for gender bias is the lack of awareness among school administrators, educators and teachers and the long-term implications of these materials on the individual, society and nation. The education system should focus upon helping children develop to their fullest potential as individuals rather than channelling stereotypes (Bornstein, 1980:24) but neglecting the social issue of gender bias may defeat that purpose.

Insight into the presence of gender bias and stereotypes in school textbooks will encourage curriculum planners and educators to design lessons that will make students aware of this gender role conflict and by doing so experience intellectual, social and emotional growth. In particular the Education Ministry can then gear the writers towards “developing positive attitude and new images of Malaysian women”



(Saedah Siraj, 1990: 70). There is therefore a need to examine Malaysian English Language textbooks for gender bias. We have to be aware of gender bias because it is synonymous with inequality. As writers, teachers and parents, we have an obligation to weigh our words, to examine them and use them with greater care (Graham, 1975: 63). Also, the findings of the study will be important to teachers who in the end play the most important role in the personal and intellectual development of the child.

In addition, the Malaysian English language curriculum does not specifically and explicitly address the issue of gender inequality. Consequently, teachers pay little or no attention to the issue of gender bias, and may understandably be oblivious to elements of gender bias in textbooks.

Thus, there is therefore a need to examine a sample of English language textbooks for the occurrence of gender bias. In addition, there is a need to find out to what extent, if at all, teachers are aware of gender bias in textbooks. Also, the findings of the study will be important to teachers, who in the end play the most important role in personal and intellectual development of the child.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions, specifically in reference to Malaysian English Language textbooks: